

## Sacred Space and the Dynamics of Seeing

Elizabeth Cheng

Several years ago, when I was about to embark on a journey as a spiritual companion, May, a wise friend of mine took me to a famous art museum. Navigating the spacious exhibition halls and the numerous artworks on display, May thoughtfully selected only a few paintings. She gave this tour a theme: space. I still remember standing before one of the paintings, gazing at it until I “entered” the space. I am deeply grateful for this experience, through which the Lord beckoned me to learn to hold a sacred space where my fellow sojourners can encounter Him.



### *Seeing and Perceiving*

As creatures in space and time, seeing is probably the most important way in which we know and orient ourselves in the world. From the vast span of the night sky to a crowded living space, from a hike on the Phoenix Mountain to the fast crossing at Central, from Gerard Manley Hopkins's cry “O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!” to the Hubble-Lemaitre Law theorizing the beginning and expansion of the universe – humanity lives and moves in space while space informs and forms us in an intimate, concrete, and mutual relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond seeing with naked eyes or through glasses, telescope or microscope, there is a deeper seeing – the seeing with the soul. Eliade writes: “For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.”<sup>2</sup> Such breaks are perceived by the ancient people as centers, at which they build their dwellings.<sup>3</sup> Eliade's “breaks in space” echoes the “thin places” in Celtic Christianity; the place where the veil between the material and the spiritual worlds (or using Eliade's language, the sacred and the profane) is very “thin”, such as the burning bush where the Lord manifested Himself to Moses.

Yet, there are ways of seeing that lead to illusion, violence, and catastrophe. Individualism, secularism, nationalism, etc. – whoever clings to them will fall and often drag others or even nations to downfall. The subjugation, exploitation, and violence, which characterized humanity's

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting Fr. Ha's lecture notes: 【朱光潛】用美感的經驗去講，我們同這個世界的物件是有一種移情作用的。即人將自己的感情及感受，移入所見之物（如，我們心中快樂，覺得橋下嬉游的魚也快樂）……反過來，外物也會影響自己（如蘇東坡說：「寧可食無肉，不可居無竹。」即竹為人帶來美感）。

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

deteriorating relationship external space, both reflects and is a result of the alienation, objectification, and fear in the interior space. Martin Buber writes: “It becomes increasingly difficult … to say Thou with the whole undivided being, and finally, in order to be able to say it, man must come out of the false security into the venture of the infinite—out of the community, that is now over-arched only by the temple dome and not also by the firmament, into the final solitude.”<sup>4</sup> For the right relationship with the world to be restored, we need to turn our eyes to the Thou who created the firmament and the Infinite who became flesh and entered space.

### ***How Jesus Sees***

Jesus made his first dwelling in a womb and laid his head in a manger, away from royal palaces. Jesus broke partitions and walls of gender, class, ideology, and all. He gladly ate with the “sinners” and readily challenged the religious leaders. He gazed at the rich young man and the woman caught in the act of adultery with the same love. He reached out to others, even when He was hanging on the Cross. He is so close to the Father that even when He could no longer experience that closeness, He loved till His last breath. By so dying, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, and humanity is no longer separated from God.

Jesus sees God's redemptive work as a dynamic process, of which His Passion is a part. Thus He communicated hope to His disciples, saying, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth…” (John 16: 12, 13). Matthew recorded our Lord's words at the Last Supper in an intimate language: “I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.” (Matthew 26: 29) In the darkest moment of history, Jesus was able to say, “It is finished.” (John 19: 30)

The Risen Christ continues to see and speak, through many seers – apostles, prophets, scientists, mystics, and poets.

### ***Seers***

The first seer to be introduced in this essay is Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a French Jesuit priest and paleontologist. Teilhard felt drawn to God *and* nature at a very young age. In the trenches during the WWI, Teilhard began to have religious experiences which, as he shared with his superiors, eventually led to his exiles in China and in New York City. While in China, Teilhard made major contribution to the discovery of the Peking Man, part of the Homo erectus phase of human evolution. In *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard trains his readers to see. According to this visionary, evolution is a process that leads to increasing complexity, i.e., from elementary matters to biosphere (an envelope or “membrane” of the earth consisting of living

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, (Free Press, 1971), 89.

things)<sup>5</sup> and eventually noosphere (a thinking layer, “another membrane: the advances of a circle of fire around the spark made by the first reflective consciousness”).<sup>6</sup> Teilhard proposes that “evolution is a rise toward consciousness.”<sup>7,8</sup> Teilhard believes that the process of evolution, rather than leading to fragmentation and collapse of an impersonal universe (a conviction held by many scientists of his time), will move toward higher orders and converge in the Omega Point, “a supremely autonomous focal point of union”<sup>9</sup>, which is Christ. About Christ, Teilhard writes elsewhere: “Christ has a cosmic body that extends throughout the universe.”<sup>10</sup> Contrary to a competitive outlook of evolution, Teilhard believes that “to become fully ourselves… we must advance, in the direction of convergence with all the rest, toward the ‘other.’”<sup>11</sup> Love energy is the driving force of evolution. “Driven by forces of love, the fragments of the world are seeking one another so the world may come to be.”<sup>12</sup> Basically, Teilhard’s hypothesis of evolution is one of dancing of the matter/body and the spirit, driven by love, moving toward union with Christ. Individuals, generations, and cultures are part of this flow, in which we become part of a much bigger body.

Over the decades, there has been convergence among scientists and philosophers on several points related to Teilhard’s vision of the universe and of evolution.

First, we are part of a much bigger body. Dan Siegel, American psychiatrist and developer of interpersonal neurobiology, coined the term coined the word “MWe” for human identity, i.e., “the linking of a differentiated *me* with a distinct *we*.”<sup>13</sup> Eugene Gendlin, American philosopher and developer of Focusing, an important paradigm for psychotherapy, writes: “Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people – in fact, the whole universe.”<sup>14</sup> More and more scientists and philosophers hold the notion of interconnectedness of humanity and its interior and exterior spaces. From a Christian perspective, we are part of the Body of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, translated by Sarah Appleton-Weber, (Sussex Academic Press, 2021), 41-60. An older translation of the same book is titled *The Phenomenon of Man*, translated by Bernard Wall, published in 1959 by Harper & Brothers.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Savart defines Teilhard’s concept of consciousness as “awareness accompanied by an appropriate response.” Louise Savart, *Teilhard de Chardin’s The Phenomenon of Man Explained*, (Paulist Press, 2020), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 186. Emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, (Cosmic Life, 1916, XII, 58). Quoted from <https://teilharddechardin.org/teilhard-de-chardin/teilhards-quotes/>

<sup>11</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 187. Emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 188. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 96.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing*, 2nd edition, (Bantam Books, 1978), 77. Quoted by Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection within Christian Spirituality*, (Tasora Books, 2010), xvi.

The concept of the Body of Christ used to be heady and abstract for me until one early morning in 2022. Just as I was stepping onto the street, I saw three strangers approaching. At that moment, I felt in my body that they were my siblings. In a few seconds, they walked past me. That felt sense of belonging, of being one, however, stayed with me for a long time. That was a moment of true “seeing”, of seeing reality as it is. Now that I have been confirmed into the Catholic Church, I reflect on the transition time and am deeply grateful that the felt sense of belonging and of being one with humanity from that encounter has helped me persevere in love and hope when my decision was questioned and challenged.

Second, this interconnectedness is perceived in an embodied way. In other word, we do not perceive mainly with our left brain but rather, in Eugene Gendlin’s words again: “We perceive the universe with our felt sense in our physical body.”<sup>15</sup> In their early years as collaborators, Jesuits Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell realized that “Gendlin’s ‘felt sensing’ was a critical key to the Teilhardian sense for evolution within human awareness.”<sup>16</sup> Together, they developed *Biospiritual Focusing* and have, over the decades, companioned children, youth, and adults into “their own inner body-process of wholeness as their experiential bridge into a deepening faith-experience of the Body of Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

Third, integration is key for health. Dan Siegel defines integration as a state in which “the parts maintain their differentiated nature and become functionally linked to one another. In this very specific manner, *integration* (italic author’s) … means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>18</sup> He summarizes nine domains of integration, which encompass integration within, without, and between.<sup>19</sup> I would add that integration is key to both physical and spiritual health,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from <https://biospiritual.org/welcome/our-origins/>

<sup>17</sup> From the blurb of Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection within Christian Spirituality*, (Tasora Books, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Siegel articulated nine domains of integration (see Siegel, *Mind*, pp. 90-96):

- Integration of consciousness: how we differentiate the knowing from the known.
- Bilateral integration: the left and the right brain.
- Vertical integration is how we connect with our bodies, allowing the internal flow of sensations to rise from ‘below’ into our cortically mediated awareness ‘above.’
- Memory integration is how we take the differentiated elements of implicit memory – perceptions, emotions, bodily sensations, and behavioral plans, as well as mental models and priming – and link them together into explicit forms of factual and autobiographical memory.
- Narrative integration is how we make sense of our lives by weaving the distinct elements of memory of lived life together and then extracting meaning from those reflections.
- State integration involves the many states of mind that we each have, those differentiated ways of being that can then be linked to one another to make a continuous yet not homogenous sense of self across time, creating mental coherence within a given state and across many states of mind.
- Interpersonal integration is the way we honor and support each other’s differences within relationships and then promote linkage through respectful, kind, and compassionate communication.”

and it echoes God's promise: "For he [the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, *to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*" in Ephesians 1:9, 10 (emphasis mine)

What theologians, philosophers, and scientists labor for years and write in volumes, poets may utter in a few words. Rumi (1207-1273), Sufi poet, writes:

You take blood and make sperm.  
You make sperm and create an animal.  
You use the animal to evolve intelligence.  
Life keeps leading more life. <sup>20</sup>

Here Rumi sees himself as animal and as human; in another poem, Rumi sees himself in dust and mineral, part of the elementary matter, biosphere, and noosphere. He also sees love as the driving force of such evolution:

In the slaughterhouse of love, they kill  
only the best, none of the weak or deformed.  
Don't run away from this dying.  
Whoever's not killed for love is dead meet.<sup>21</sup>

Though more than 600 years apart, Rumi and Teilhard were of one mind on evolution. No wonder – they are created by the same Creator who put them through the fire of love, loss, and exile, interior and exterior.

### ***Implications for Christian Formation***

I believe that learning to see can help form and transform Christians and Christian communities in the following ways.

First, from fragmentation to integration.

Second, from division to unity.

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- Temporal integration is how we address the existential issues of life that our mentally created and cortically mediated sense of time creates" The longing for certainty in the face of uncertainty; the longing for permanence in the face of the reality of transience; and, the longing for immortality in the face of mortality.
  - Transpirational integration or identity integration, "that emerges as we 'breathe across' the other eight domains of integration to emerge with a more expanded sense of who we are in our lives and the world. Identity integration is all about the notion that we have a personal interior as well as an interpersonal exterior... a private me as well as an interconnected we."

<sup>20</sup> Jalal Al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi* – reissue: A Poetry Anthology, translated by Coleman Barks, (HarperCollins, 2010), p. 269 (from "A Dove in the Eaves").

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

Third, from a static faith to a dynamic faith, which can hold tension and trust in the slow work of God (using Teilhard's phrase).

The essence of Christian formation is to learn to love as God loves. To love, we first need to let God love us, to gaze at us with His infinite love. We need to learn to gaze back at God's loving gaze. Contemplation, a long, loving gaze at the real (Walter Burghardt), is a necessary practice. Then as we return to daily life, we learn to see all with eyes transformed by God's love.



A few weeks ago, I found myself at the center of a labyrinth. It was at least three times deeper than the centers of all the labyrinths that I had walked. Came to mind were these words of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity: "Bury Yourself in me that I may bury myself in You *until I depart to contemplate in Your light the abyss of Your greatness.*"<sup>22</sup> I had been puzzled by the last clause: If one has arrived at the Center, why depart? And to where?

Standing at this deep center, I began to see: what we perceive as sacred is but the edge of "the abyss of the greatness of God." When we reach the edge, we bid farewell to sight, perception, and the concept of space. Then we plunge – or more accurately, we are drawn – into the Omega Point. Then, we will be one with Love. Finally, we are Home.

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<sup>22</sup> St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *The Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, vol. 1, (ICS Publications, 2014), 254. The quoted text is from St. Elizabeth's famous prayer, "O My God, Trinity Whom I Adore." Emphasis mine.